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SUBJECT: BELARUS: CODEL CARDIN SECURES AMCIT'S RELEASE, ADVANCES

DIALOGUE

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Summary

11. (SBU) A CODEL led by Helsinki Commission Chairman Senator Cardin visited Belarus June 30, the most senior USG delegation since the 1994 visit of President Clinton. The CODEL met with President Lukashenka -- who pardoned AMCIT Emanuel Zeltser in response to the CODEL's request -- for over two hours, and presented detailed U.S. concerns about human rights in Belarus. Lukashenka was generally dismissive about human rights issues, stating at length that the U.S. should focus on economic and strategic factors, and expressed the view that U.S. sanctions should be lifted quickly: the delegation confirmed that the lifting of sanctions was a mutual goal, but one that could only be reached by further concrete dialogue and reforms. End summary.

Meeting Participants

12. (U) U.S.

Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Delegation Chair Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), Assistant Senate Majority Leader Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY 28), Chairwoman, House Rules Committee

Rep. Mike McIntyre (D-NC 7), House Armed Services Committee Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D-TX 25), House Ways and Means Committee Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-AL 4), House Appropriations Committee Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ 4), House Foreign Affairs Committee Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Senate Armed Services Committee Minsk Charge Jonathan Moore Fred Turner, Chief of Staff, CSCE

Belarus

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka Boris Batura, Chair of the Council of the Republic Vladimir Andreychenko, Speaker of the House of Representatives Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Martynov Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Valentin Rybakov

Lukashenka's Introduction

13. (SBU) Lukashenka began the meeting with a long opening statement; he did not introduce his Belarusian colleagues. After welcoming the delegation, he told of his conviction that "your visit will open a new page in Belarusian-U.S. relations" and expressed the hope that the delegation would obtain an "objective and unbiased view" of Belarus. Lukashenka showed particular pleasure at the (coincidental) timing of the delegation's visit, coming on the eve of a "holy day" for

Belarus -- the 65th anniversary of the country's liberation by the Soviet army -- and noted that "given our tragic experience, we are interested in constructive relations."

- 14. (SBU) On sanctions, Lukashenka was blunt: "The U.S. will realize the hopelessness of sanctions...we are ready to restore diplomatic...staff in exchange for the removal [sic] of the Belarus Democracy Act...we need to put schemes and stereotypes aside." Lukashenka claimed that the European Union (EU) had moved forward where the U.S. had not: "we are a reliable partner of the EU" and "they have shown readiness to move forward."
- 15. (SBU) Lukashenka cited areas of cooperation, such as bilateral trade, non-proliferation (referring to Belarus' 1994 surrendering of its nuclear weapons) as well as fighting drug trafficking, trafficking in persons (TIP), and terrorism. He defended the state of human rights in Belarus only indirectly, arguing that "Belarus is a young state...we don't have your long-term experience as an 'older democracy'." Lukashenka also cited Belarus' economic difficulties, and expressed thanks to the U.S. for its engagement with the IMF. (Comment: The IMF had voted June 29 -- the U.S. abstained -- to increase Belarus' previously approved \$2.5 billion credit by about \$1 billion. End comment.)
- 16. (SBU) In closing, departing from his prepared remarks, Lukashenka stressed that "it is obligatory for our relations to be normalized...the question is, will that happen with us or the people who come after us...let's eliminate barriers and start drawing our relations in 'bright colors'. The U.S. is the leading country of the world, a center of high technology, with many clever people...We are ready to take steps that do not compromise our sovereignty or independence...we have no closed topics."

Chairman Cardin's Introduction

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- 17. (SBU) Chairman Cardin thanked Lukashenka for accommodating the delegation, explained that the visit was taking place under the auspices of the CSCE, and introduced the U.S. participants. The Chairman spoke of the importance of Belarus to the U.S., adding that the election of Barack Obama brought new possibilities for bilateral relations. He quickly described Belarus' compliance with its OSCE commitments for human rights and democracy as "critically important", underlining that under the Helsinki Final Act each member state can challenge others on their commitments.
- 18. (SBU) Before presenting detailed areas of concern, Chairman Cardin raised the case of ill and imprisoned AMCIT Emanuel Zeltser, asking Lukashenka to "use his authority" to bring about Mr. Zeltser's humanitarian release.
- 19. (SBU) Cardin cited freedom of assembly, NGO registration and the conduct of elections as areas that needed improvement; while recognizing the benefits of trade, he also stressed the need for economic reform. The Chairman also noted that it would be easier for the U.S. could better observe what happens in Belarus if there were more staff in the U.S. Embassy. (Comment: Embassy Minsk has been limited by the GOB to a maximum of five permanent diplomatic staff since May 2008. End comment.)

Lukashenka's Response

110. (SBU) Lukashenka appeared somewhat agitated and began his response in that spirit: "Dear Mr. Cardin, all of your conclusions should be based on the truth." Lukashenka claimed that "there are more NGOs per capita in Belarus than in the U.S." and that the opposition's rights to confront the authorities are protected by the constitution. After denigrating the opposition, he blustered that "the Europeans understand the weakness of the opposition" and know that the

- "President represents the interests of the population, not the opposition." Lukashenka suggested that someone from Congress or the "CIA, FBI, or White House" should visit Belarus for a while, after which he/she would conclude that the situation is "no worse than in the U.S."
- 111. (SBU) Lukashenka condemned what he called "double standards": "Our election law is no worse and no better than those in other countries of the former USSR, Russia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan...[but] you do not talk to them in the language of sanctions." Finding that GOB policy was "socially oriented", Lukashenka asserted that reforms are carried out "in the interests of the people."
- ¶12. (SBU) Lukashenka dismissed most of the press at this point, and raised privatization with the hope that some Belarusian firms would be acquired by U.S. firms rather than by others (read: Russia). He then accused Embassy Minsk of not informing Congress of these points, and asked rhetorically "are we in a state of war?...The U.S. is a huge empire, we are ready to build normal relations...why are you trying to find problems in our country [and] repeating the concerns of the opposition?" Continuing in this vein, with Charge present, Lukashenka declaimed that "we cannot allow opposition protests to be led by U.S. diplomats, as [former] Ambassador [Karen] Stewart did with her staff...observe the actions of the opposition, but do so professionally."
- 13. (SBU) On ill and imprisoned AMCIT Emanuel Zeltser, who had been in GOB custody since March 2008 (and the subject of repeated requests for his release on humanitarian grounds), Lukashenka said that "I never thought this issue would arise between our countries...[but] by the Belarusian Constitution I can let this person free...if this will help our relations, I will take this step today." Lukashenka made a further appeal for the delegation to look at Belarus with "eyes wide open", and complained that Charge [who had accompanied and briefed the CODEL on their bus from Lithuania that morning] "could have told you a lot of things that are happening in Belarus."

Delegation Response

- 114. (SBU) Chairman Cardin first assured Lukashenka that the delegation's concerns were based on information from multiple sources, not just Embassy Minsk, and noted that "we do not view you as an enemy; we view you as a country that needs to make progress on reform." He confirmed that the release of AMCIT Emanuel Zeltser would be a "very positive step." Senator Durbin congratulated Belarus on the July 3rd holiday, and asked about Belarus' dependence on Russia for energy and export markets, adding a general query about Belarusian-Russian relations.
- \P 15. (SBU) Rep. Smith repeated the thanks for the decision to MINSK 00000217 003.2 OF 005

release Mr. Zeltser. Stressing the bipartisan nature of the delegation and the support of both parties for the Belarusian Democracy Act, he encouraged Lukashenka to broaden his own sources of information. The Congressman explained to the President that U.S. concerns about human rights were shared widely in various international fora, including the OSCE and UNGA, and noted that President Obama had continued the fundamental sanctions regime that was established under President Bush. Smith welcomed the opportunity for dialogue, suggesting Lukashenka engage in similar dialogue with the opposition; he also acknowledged the terrible effect of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and praised Belarusian cooperation on TIP. He asserted that "a journalist who criticizes you can face four years in jail" and confirmed that no such threat faces journalists in the U.S. Rep. Smith added that he has met people who have beaten at protests in Belarus and that there are also concerns about religious freedom in the country.

Lukashenka's Rejoinder

- 116. (SBU) Angrier now, Lukashenka sputtered that "you absolutely lack realistic information...[what you know] is shared through your embassy from the opposition." He described the Chernobyl tragedy (Belarus "did not build it, benefit from it, or blow it up" but received 80% of the radioactive material) and U.S. sanctions as being in the same context. "The U.S. should have helped us; instead, you introduced sanctions...the U.S. has offended Belarus."
- 117. (SBU) On Russia, Lukashenka characterized his interactions with Russian leaders: "How can you do this to us [blocking natural gas and oil, blocking dairy exports]...Belarus was a shield defending Moscow [in the Second World War]...how could you stop your assistance?
- 118. (SBU) Returning to U.S.-Belarusian topics, Lukashenka requested that the Belarus Democracy Act should be "taken away": "Lift all sanctions imposed on our country; by this you would demonstrate to our people your kindness and the role of the United States. I have solved the problem of Mr. Zeltser within a couple of minutes. I am not forcing you to act in a couple of minutes -- maybe by the end of the year." Turning to Congressman Smith, Lukashenka stated: "You have listened to a new point of view -- by those elected by the Belarusian people...[we] know that human rights criticism in the UN and OSCE is organized by the United States...you can buy any opposition paper in the kiosk downstairs [in the Presidential Administration]...if such information was presented in the U.S. press [as about me], the journalists would have been fined or imprisoned...our journalists can say anything they want."
- 119. (SBU) Lukashenka blamed the Russian mass media for an "information war" against Belarus, adding that "your embassy knows about this, but has not informed you". "Our nation is concerned with vitally important issues...when the economic crisis broke out, Russia thought they could take us over." In the same vein, Lukashenka complained further: "First, we asked [Russia] for \$2 billion to strengthen our currency. 'Yes, \$2 billion, no problem.' Russia had formed a huge reserve. [But then] Russia made conditions that would lead to a loss of sovereignty; we would have become a part of Russia. They told us that dairy products could be imported only if Russian investors could acquire the [Belarusian] producers...then the Russian media put pressure on Belarus to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. How did the U.S. react? I ordered the MFA to meet with you and ask for your support. What is \$3 billion-\$5 billion to the U.S.? On a daily basis you print one thousand times [sic] more. You could have done this, come to us as heroes, people who supported us."
- 120. (SBU) Recovering somewhat, and heading towards his conclusion, Lukashenka hedged, explaining that "I do not say this to prejudice our relations with the Russian Federation; no country can replace them; we depend on them." He said he wants to "make a balance" between the interests of the U.S. and Russia. Finally -- long after the meeting was due to end -- he argued that "what human rights are possible when it's a question of the sovereignty of our country?"

Chairman Cardin's Conclusion

121. (SBU) Senator Cardin thanked Lukashenka for being generous with his time. He told Lukashenka that he had been to Chernobyl, and added that Senator Durbin's question on energy security, environment, and economic issues was very timely: "The U.S. will be engaged on these issues." Cardin rejected the idea that journalists in the United States are sent to jail, telling Lukashenka that there are no restrictions on the independent media in the U.S. The Chairman agreed that it would be

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important for the U.S. and Belarus to take more opportunities to understand each other, but he implored Lukashenka to make progress with human rights and democratic reforms. In

conclusion, Chairman Cardin expressed interest in continuing bilateral dialogue.

Aftermath

- 122. (SBU) After the formal session concluded, Lukashenka pulled Chairman Cardin aside for a brief discussion about strategic issues and perspectives. Lukashenka was ebullient as the delegation departed, embracing a number of his U.S. guests and joking that Rep. Smith was the "number one enemy" of Belarus.
- 123. (U) Lukashenka carried through with his promise and signed the pardon for Mr. Zeltser, who was released on the evening of June 30 and returned to the United States July 1.

Other Events

- 124. (SBU) The CODEL also had a working lunch with nine leaders of civil society, had a brief press conference at Embassy Minsk, paid homage to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust at the "Yama" memorial, met with Jewish community leaders and toured the community museum, and laid flowers at Minsk's victory monument. Staff and spouses also participated in these events.
- 125. (SBU) Luncheon guests included Alyaksandr Kazulin, 2006 presidential candidate and former political prisoner; Viktar Karniyenka, Deputy Chair, "For Freedom" movement; Vintsuk Vyachorka, Deputy Chair, Belarusian Popular Front; Anatol Lyabedzka, Chair, United Civic Party; Zhanna Litvina, Chair, Belarusian Association of Journalists; Oleg Gulak, Chair, Belarus Helsinki Committee; Vital Rymasheuski, Co-Chair, Belarusian Christian Democracy Party; Sergey Kalyakin, Chair, "Young Belarus" movement and former political prisoner. The lunch was abbreviated due to the long meeting with Lukashenka, but the delegation engaged the participants in candid conversation about the nature of human rights concerns. The Belarusian guests made a positive impression on the CODEL; while noting some progress in some areas, they detailed others where progress is still needed. They confirmed the CODEL's concerns about conditions for political parties and NGOs as well as for the conduct of elections.

Atmospherics

126. (SBU) The GOB was clearly under orders to make the CODEL's visit as smooth as possible. The dignitary escort unit of the traffic police led the CODEL's motorcade from the Lithuanian border into Minsk, to all stops in Minsk, and back to Lithuania again. At Victory Square, for the first time in 15 years, U.S. flags were paired with Belarusian flags -- in the shadow of Lee Harvey Oswald's former apartment -- as the delegation laid flowers on the Victory Monument. Separately, the fact that Lukashenka devoted over two hours of his day to the CODEL -- and recovered a sense of joviality at the end of the meeting -- is not insignificant. (Comment: At a July 2 wreath-laying ceremony with the diplomatic corps, Lukashenka greeted Charge very warmly and thanked him for the CODEL's visit. End comment.)

Embassy Comment

127. (SBU) Based upon his poor state of health, the USG has been seeking amnesty or a pardon for Mr. Zeltser since his arrest in March 2008. The Embassy had recently received signals from the Belarusian Presidential Administration that his release would be achieved by the end of June. We are very grateful to Chairman Cardin and the other members of his delegation for emphasizing the importance of Mr. Zeltser's release and securing a pardon from Lukashenka.

Embassy Comment Cont'd

128. (SBU) While Lukashenka continues to deny the significance

of U.S. concerns about human rights in Belarus, his meeting with the CODEL raises two very important points. First, he has heard first-hand and in detail from senior U.S. visitors that human rights reforms are essential and will not be dismissed by the U.S. for economic or strategic reasons. Second, although he is likely playing to an audience as much in Moscow as anywhere else, Lukashenka and the high level of attention paid to the delegation confirmed tremendous interest in having a dialogue with the U.S., a point which gives us more leverage with him. While there are rarely any guarantees in Belarus, the desire for

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continued, senior dialogue with the U.S. offers the hope that the GOB might avoid the sort of backsliding on human rights that would risk the chances for that dialogue to continue.